

Small Steps to a Healthier 2006

By Jenny Sanford, First Lady, State of South Carolina

Early January marks a time to reflect on past successes and to set new goals for this next year. Mark and I started the Healthy SC Challenge just seven months ago to encourage South Carolinians to make individual changes that result in healthier lifestyles. While there are many great success stories from this endeavor already, among my greatest hopes for 2006 is that many more people will feel that the rewards of healthier living far outweigh the barriers that prevent them from making better choices.

New Year's resolutions provide the perfect opportunity to look at things we can do to improve our health and resolve to make those changes. Everyone is motivated differently – relieving stress, looking better, setting a good example for your kids, and being there in the future for loved ones. My own family history of cancer is a major motivator for me. Instead of waiting until a health crisis is upon me, I'm fighting it by not smoking, keeping active and eating nutritiously. And since I will pass on this family history to my children, it is critical that I also pass on healthier behaviors to protect them.

We also have different goals. Some might want to eat more fruit and vegetables, others need to quit smoking or lose significant weight. Whatever the goal, we can't be effective without a plan of attack. I'd like to suggest some strategies to help you develop and reach your goals:

1) Craft a plan – Setting impossible goals promises spirit deflation – think about what's attainable for you and plan how you're going to get there. This could include setting definite start dates, documenting your journey with a food journal, and actually scheduling active times into your days. Detailing your successes could also lend momentum to keep going.

2) Take small steps – Since attaining your goal may take time and persistence, concentrate on smaller, habit-changing steps first, such as setting your alarm earlier to exercise, or taking the stairs instead of the elevator. Then, you can build up to larger goals, like running a 5K race.

3) Measure yourself – Whether using a scale, taking measurements, or photographing yourself, keep track of your body's changes so you can see the results of your work. Another way you can see tangible results is through an outcome based fitness program. The U.S. Army's program found online at www.hooah4health.com/4You/apft.htm includes an age and gender specific fitness test and a body mass index calculator. While you may not be able to perform all of the activities at first, as you improve, you will see your point values increase.

4) Clean house – Not all of us have willpower to resist tasty treats from the pantry. You might want to get rid of the high-fat, high-calorie foods, or watch less television with the junk food ads that could cause you to stumble. Instead, think of nutritious foods you find satisfying – maybe some veggies with a low-cal dip or a smoothie with your favorite fresh fruits. Get creative – healthy foods can still be fun!

5) Ensure accountability – You’re more likely to stick with it if others are aware of your goals – friends or family can encourage you, join you, and hold your feet to the fire. There are groups across the state you might consider joining to help find partners in wellness. For example, YMCA’s across the state are conducting “Shrinkdowns”. You can go to www.ymca.net/ to find out if your local YMCA is participating. Many churches, like the AME church, also have healthy programs. If your work, church or community doesn’t have a way for people to motivate each other towards healthier lifestyles, maybe you can start one!

More help can be found on the Healthy SC Challenge website at www.healthysc.gov. Here you’ll find tips and links that can keep you informed and motivated. Also, you can stay motivated and keep your New Year’s resolution fresh in your mind by signing up on the website to receive weekly emails of nutrition, physical fitness and smoking cessation tips. Please use the site to let us know how you’re doing on with your resolution individually, in your family, church, school, workplace or community.

I wish you all the best in health and happiness this New Year, and pray that 2006 is marked with peace and joy uncommon for you and your family.

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